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"Fake News" and Christian Freedom – The Necessity for A Dialogue

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Summary

Politics and media development in our days is terrifying. Manipulation is dominating the social space. The so-called Overton window concept show us how, by way of "fake news" in a particular setting, certain completely unacceptable opinions slowly become part of the social consensus. Without understanding this change, people become deprived of their freedom and begin to feel more and more helpless. Five hundred years ago, theologian Martin Luther (1483-1546) rose against such attempts, defending his theological beliefs form estranged and twisted interpretations. In his essay, On Christian Freedom (1520), he took a firm position. Using a twofold thesis - that the Christian is both a free man and master of everything so he is not subjected to anyone, and that the Christian is also a humble servant to everyone and that he is subjected to everyone - he clarified that faith and love lead the Christian in all his activities and works. Luther clarified that in faith and love a fullness of the relationship between God and His loved ones - the mankind - is achieved, thus being humble does not mean giving up on our freedom; instead, it means to have the strength and courage to achieve it! Based on the four dimensions of freedom - political, social, identity, and dialogue - Luther provides an insight into his own understanding of freedom, which is still applicable in today's social climate and the challenges of this age. These four dimensions helps the believer to take a clear stance against targeted attempts at deception which are immersed in "fake news."

Key words: *"fake news," Christian freedom, Martin Luther, Reformation*

Introduction[1]

The beginning of the 21st century found us in an epoch where the truth is often individualized and in which it seems to be very apt to have criteria for assessing it, as well as the standards and values which the individual can follow. In this context, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation seems to be a very fitting occasion, because it is calling on us to come back to its original insight - "about the freedom of the Christian" – into the very center of contemporary social circumstances, and into further developing the dimensions of Christian freedom in order to ascertain in which areas of social order can this theological knowledge be applied.

1. Contemporary Political Developments

In political sciences there is a term, *Overton window*, which was named after Joseph P. Overton (1960-2003), former vice-president of the American analytic center, *Mackinac Center for Public Policy*. Overton developed a phase model which describes the ways in which a small expert group (*ie., a think tank*) can, in a relatively short time, through false information and controlled action, qualitatively alter the public opinion. Namely, if such an "expert group" should want to implement an idea which is completely unacceptable to the public, it will then begin to utilize a series of actions with the purpose of achieving that goal, which will result in people completely changing their opinion in a very short time, thus gradually losing their own freedom. The model developed by Joseph Overton describes precisely this kind of alteration in public opinion regarding a subject, and he identifies the following themes:

1. The unacceptable ones, the unthinkable and forbidden ones. A taboo.
2. The radical ones.
3. The possible ones.
4. The rational ones: those that are accepted by society.
5. The legalized ones, which are based in state policy (Lehman 2012).

The *think tanks* which follow this type of politics are particularly characteristic of the 21st century, and it is their intent to manipulate political opinions prior to the elections; to adjust social ethical standards prior to making some important de-

1 Benjamin KL Simon is the professor of Ecumenical missiology at the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches in Bossey. The paper is the product of Professor Benjamin Simon's lecture at the Festival Of The Alternative And The Left in Šibenik held on September 8th 2017 under the name of, "Fake News And Christian Freedom: The Necessity For A Dialogue." The lecture was part of the theological portion of the Festival, which was dedicated to commemorating 500 years of Reformation.

cisions (i.e., a referendum, *author's note*); and implementing various other ideas which form social developments. These developments, however, are moving on a previously established path, with a certain sense of freedom which people gain in such situations. Thus, the ideas which first appeared to be unacceptable, radical, and unthinkable in terms of application in the public discourse, after being treated in the public media, politics, and economy, they become completely acceptable by finding their way in the public opinion of the citizens. Furthermore, such ideas can, in their final stages, even receive their legislative form, making "fake news" a consensus of sorts and accepted public opinion. Famous Russian film director, Nikita Mikhalkov (2014), explains the way of altering public opinion towards a certain topic using the example of a phenomenon which is still unthinkable in our societies today. I am referring to cannibalism. The development of attitude change happens on several levels:

The *first* level describes the current opinion: cannibalism is unthinkable. Such an example might cause a skeptical chuckle. We will not even discuss such a thing. "Something like that could not possibly happen!"

At the *second* level, the subject changes from "unacceptable" into "radical," and it slowly moves into the space of freedom of discussion. In smaller gatherings, debate circles, and conferences, it will begin to take its place. Esteemed members of the academic community will use the form of "scientific discussion" to clarify the subject, which will give it increasingly more information space, until it stops being taboo. In this context, Mikhalkov says, "The result of the first step in the *Overton window* is that it is placed the unacceptable topic into circulation, neutralized its meaning, and destroyed the clarity of the problem."[2]

And so we reach the *third* level, when the controversial topic moves from the "radical" sphere into the sphere of "possible." We continue to cite esteemed academic circles and proceed to create euphemisms. For example, we do not speak of cannibalism anymore, but about "anthropophilia." The point is to separate the word from its meaning in the public mind. At the same time, conditions are being created for establishing a historical precedent. It can be based on a mystical, real, or a simply invented fact, but it is crucial that it contributes to legitimizing an unacceptable idea. The main purpose of this phase is to partially pull "anthropophilia" from the sphere of illegality, even if it is a special historical moment.

At level *four*, the *Overton window* moves the topic from the "possible" to the "rational" or "neutral," and it is argued to be a "biological necessity." It is then claimed that eating human flesh is a "genetic predisposition" which can be part

2 Cf. Cristina MESTRE, Overton. Wie man eine unannehmbare Idee akzeptiert (30.09.2014), https://de.sputniknews.com/german.ruvr.ru/2014_09_30/Overton-Wie-man-eine-unannehmbare-Idee-akz eptiert-7847/ (16.08.2017).

of "human nature." For example, in case of danger from starvation or, let's say, "insurmountable circumstances," a free man has to have the right of choice.

At level *five*, we artificially create conditions for debate. The topic's popularity is then based on mythological or historical persons, as well as on living media personalities. Anthropophilia is then discussed and its position in public is affirmed through the news, talk shows, movies, popular music, and video clips. A kind of popularization and populism then reemerges. It becomes a hit in breaking news: it automatically appears in the press and in show business, and it gains a political meaning.[3]

In this way, cannibalism has moved from being a popular topic to part of everyday politics. Through newly formed lobbying groups and sociological studies which support the promoters of legalization of cannibalism, we begin forming a legal basis for its adoption, and it is soon presented as a new dogma, which states, "Anthropophilia must not be banned!" So, the legal novelty has been accepted, the topic enters the formative and educational systems, and soon the new generations will not even know how to think otherwise. As we have already said, this example of cannibalism by Nikita Mikhalkov is still hypothetical, and it is surely provocative. However, similar examples of things which had the purpose of controlling the freedom of thinking can be found all across the history of mankind, dating from much earlier than the time when Overton developed his model which we are discussing here.

For example, we can see that a similar development happened in the history of Germany prior to World War II and during the war itself. Systematic persecution of Jewish citizens, which ended in a mass extinction of more than 6 million European Jews in the camps of Auschwitz and Dachau, could not have possibly be foreseen nor even imagined at the beginning, when the National-Socialists came into power in Germany. However, the propaganda and the defamation of the Jews in the newspapers of the day can definitely be analyzed by using Overton's model. We can analyze Donald Trump's election victory in the same manner. Namely, at the beginning of the election race, while he was just one of many Republican candidates, many have wondered what was this magnate even doing here. And then, something that nobody of a democratic and reasonable mind could consider possible. Namely, nobody in a democratic society thought that it was possible for someone to state that torturing people "works completely," and this is precisely what the 45th President of the United States said in his first television appearance, who among other things believes that his policy should lay on

3 In this phase - in order to justify the proponents of legalization – we see the "humanization" of proponents of cannibalism (those "creative people" and "anthropophiles" are merely victims of incorrect education, and "who are we to judge them?").

the premise that fire should be fought with fire (Weaver and Ackermann 2017, 3). So, something that used to be an unthinkable thing to say is now supposed to become part of the political mainstream, which is a very debatable understanding of freedom and a public utterance of unverified claims and supposed truths. In his inauguration speech, when he was addressing the people in his hardline nationalist way, Trump will claim that America comes first – "America first!" substantiating this claim with a further claim that, in the future, "any decisions related to trade, taxes, immigration, and foreign affairs will be brought in such a way as to benefit the American workers and American families." Because, Trump continues (2017, 2), "We need to protect our borders from being ravaged by other countries which make our products, steal our companies, and destroy our jobs. This protection will lead to great progress and strength." And this is how the "American dream" got overturned; from being a place where everybody had a chance to a place which is based on "fake news" and the utopia of a smaller segment of American upper class. The ultimate goal of all this could be clearly seen in the behavior of right-wing radicals and racists in Charlottesville, Virginia,[4] after they encouraged, and even started the processes which have applied practically this verbal spiral of evil, i.e., they instigated aggression and hatred towards foreigners. In this context, it could be said that the product of our time, the slogan, "America first!" is not very far off from the "Sieg Heil!" salute.[5]

In this sense, we must point out that the truthfulness of any piece of information becomes irrelevant, because it is more to do with using "fake news" in order to awaken and stimulate certain human emotions and feelings. For example, the study which analyses the speeches of the American President in the last year and a half, including the time of the election campaign, showed that 69% of his statements were false, while 16% of them contained elements of truth (and

4 The demonstrations of the radical right were on August 12th 2017 where, among other things, an anti-demonstrator was killed as one of the radicals ran her over with his car when he drove into a group of anti-demonstrators.

5 In the context of these events, we need to pay attention to the so-called circumstances of the "post-truth", because the Oxford Dictionary proclaimed it as the word of the year 2016. "Post-truth" is used as an adjective and it refers to the "circumstances in which objective facts have a lesser influence on forming the public opinion than emotions and reactions in society, or personal and individual attitudes" (https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016). The "post-truth era" is a paradoxical term of the second decade in the 21st century. The philosophical difference between the subjective and objective truths has no merit here, because in the field of "post-truth" it's not about whether something is objectively accurate or not, because the logical consequence of emotional and emotion-soaked "post-truth" insights is that the truth can be subjected to a very loose interpretation, and we can accordingly also use the so-called "alternative facts", and now even the "fake news" have become socially acceptable. Truths are being purposefully misrepresented and twisted.

the remaining statements were true, *author's note*) (Williams 2017). However, such a study would surely produce similar results for other contemporary politicians, business consultants, or tabloid journalists, who have succumbed to a very loose and wide interpretation of happenings and treating them as such for their own benefit. This kind of behavior has become quite prevalent in our societies, politics, and (non)social media, as has manipulative understanding of freedom, which is reflected in "fake news" and is used for unification, polarization, and enslaving freedom of thinking of the majority population in a society, which is in opposition with the Christian understanding of freedom that is based in the Reformation tradition.

2. What Kind of Freedom Did Martin Luther Have in Mind?

Exactly five hundred years ago, a monk took his 95 theses and numerous other writings and took a stand against the "theological fallacies" and misinterpretations of his colleagues.[6] It was Martin Luther (1483-1546), who lived at the turn of the passing Middle Ages and the Modern times; the age of the Reformation movement, the Renaissance, and Humanism. However, it needs to be said that there were Reformation movements that could be found in Europe before Luther himself (Peter Waldes, Jan Hus, etc.), as well as after him (Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, and others). The European continent has experienced many reforms in various social aspects, such as art and culture, science, geographical discoveries, and architecture. In politics, however, changes happened with the so-called Peasant Wars and the right of the land-owners to determine their subject's religious affiliations (*cuius regio, eius religio*). Also, changes have been caused by the invention of printing and, of course, theological reformations which have, among other things, led to the undesired divisions within the Catholic Church. All of this brought about the awakening of the avant-garde spirit which called for a different new world. However, such a spirit is almost always ambivalent, because not everybody was satisfied with such a turn of events, i.e., changes and the uncertainty they inevitably bring. People can find such developments to be foreign and they can cause skepticism and doubt, considering the fact that they question their own life's routine. Thus, the Roman Catholic Church of the time, autocratic, strongly marked by papacy, was not all too happy about the new developments in European society because the Church thought it was the one who is supposed to provide important guidelines!

6 In the meantime, in history as a branch of science there is a consensus that Luther didn't really nail his 95 theses on the doors of the church in the Wittenberg castle.

This was the time when Martin Luther, a monk who married a nun and who began to question the papacy theologically, came on the scene. He wrote his most important works on understanding freedom between 1520 and 1522, before he turned 40. These works were of crucial significance at this time of transition between the old into the new age, but they also certainly contributed to our current understanding of the topic.

In 1520, Luther wrote a work called, *On Christian Freedom* (Luther, 1520), which was a product of Luther's defense of his own teaching before the person of the Pope, who threatened him with excommunication. In this extremely delicate life situation, Martin Luther clarifies his understanding of freedom before the Pope, and as early as half a year later he will be quoted in the German parliament in Worms, so he will have to explain his teaching on freedom before the political world, as well. The fundamental question was, how do we understand Christian freedom in relation to the Emperor and the German state parliament?[7] The central position of his work, On Christian Freedom, is taken by two seemingly contradictory theses:

- "The Christian is a free master of all things and subject to nobody."
- "The Christian is a humble servant to everything and subjected to all" (Luther 1520).

This famous double thesis of Luther's is surely most provocative because it is ambivalent, contradictory and, as such, it creates a certain tension, and this raises the question: how can we reflect on these two statements together? First of all, we can claim that the first thesis has to do with faith, while the other one has to do with love; thus, we have used faith and love to determine two fundamental elements of Christian life which, on the one hand, imply our relationship with God, and on the other, our relationship with our neighbors and the world. Therefore, Luther's understanding of the term of freedom an only be understood in the context of both of these relationships, because freedom is not a property which belongs to man by force of nature, nor is it something that can be attained through education nor by belonging to a political community, but it is primarily a gift of God which cannot be earned by man nor can it be acquired in any other way. It is a sort of pre-gift of God, which comes before man indulges in any activity whatsoever, because it is only in the love of God through Jesus Christ that the love of God became a gift for us. Therefore, the love of God accepts us unconditionally, regardless of all our endeavors and deeds, regardless of our ethnic background, our social status, and our material well-being. This helps develop our fundamen-

7 Martin Luther has been ostracized through the Worms Edict and went into hiding in Wartburg like an outlaw.

tal trust, which makes us free from all kinds of fear and anxiety, stopping us from sinking into the material things. However, such things often turn into idols, because they give us a feeling that they are some sort of guarantee of security and a path one wishes to take, and it ends up taking up God's place in a person's life.

However, this is opposed to the teaching of Martin Luther, which says that, in the fullness of faith in Christ, the Christian becomes "a free master of all things," which implies that, as a "free master," he is not subjected to any earthly authority, which includes the Emperor and the Pope, because the Christian only follows the word of the Gospel and does not require the mediation of any other authority, such as the Pope. This is also the first reference to Luther's double thesis, which claims that faith in God makes us free and, as such, we are not subjected to "things."

However, according to Luther, we are also the "humble servants to all things" at the same time, which raises the question: how do we harmonize between these two claims? Are they not opposed to each other? But the point is that, in this case, humility does not mean giving up on freedom, on the contrary, it is about its realization! Because this is that same love that was mentioned in the first part of the double thesis which man has experienced in God through Jesus Christ, which delivers him and drives him to serve his neighbor in the world and points him toward social and humanistic activities. However, following the love of God is no duty nor obligation; instead, it is that part of freedom which a person can experience constantly in their relationship with other humans. So, in order for a person to be saved, their faith - which stems from God's unconditional love - is not conditioned by religious works such as pilgrimages, by attempts to do some good deed, or to acquire something material in that context. Namely, the individual believer does not have to invest their strength, time, or money for God to love them, because it is already made available to them through the freedom they were given, and to turn towards the needs of his neighbors and the needs of the world, as the world is every individual Christian's field of work!

Luther implemented his ideas very quickly in Wittenberg in 1522, as he managed to procure assets from the city treasury for welfare, which included employing caregivers and doctors for the poor citizens, as well as the finances for helping the needy, and allowances for young artisans to help them start their businesses (Pietsch and Steinwachs 2000, 70 ff.).

It is worth noting that Luther's tract *On the Bondage of the Will* which he wrote in 1525 as a response against Erasmus of Rotterdam. Judging by the title, one could get the impression that the idea of this work is in complete opposition with what was said before, assuming that it implies the claim that God has been determined by God and that God is controlling all of man's moves completely

independently. This, however, is a complete misinterpretation of Luther's ideas. With Luther, it is more about the following: man is truly dependent on God's creative works and on His love, and is just a receiver in that sense, but God created people as His collaborators in the world in that sense, (*nos ei cooperaremur*), so that he could preach mercy to the poor and offer comfort to the desolate (*per nos praedicat, miseretur pauperibus, consolatur afflictos*) (Duchrow 1970, 513-14).

3. Four Dimensions About Freedom by Martin Luther

The understanding of freedom which Martin Luther developed from the Gospel message and based it on Christology did not just experience the history of its application in central Europe, but in the world as well (Axt-Piscalar and Lasogga, 2015). Namely, this teaching would not only form the Reformation churches, but other denominations as well. Furthermore, it would not only form the church circles, but would influence the entire cultural consciousness directly and indirectly. Of course, Luther's understanding of freedom must not and cannot be equaled with the worldly understanding of the freedom of the modern man, because this is contrary to the fact that, for Luther, the idea of freedom stems primarily from calling on Christ. In his opinion, the Christian is only really free through faith in Christ, and "in such a way that no force nor authority can take this freedom away from him." (Axt-Piscalar and Lasogga 2015, 8). With these new insights of his, Luther opened up some new spaces for understanding the dimensions of Christian freedom, which have a lot in common with the challenges that the 21st century brings. This is why it is important to get a better understanding of the four dimensions of Christian freedom: political, social, identity, and dialogue, which are crucial for co-existence in our societies.

3.1. The Political Dimension

Luther believes there are two autonomous areas of power in our world: the spiritual and the worldly and he illustrated the struggle for power among them (i.e., between God and the worldly forces), using his so-called teaching of the two kingdoms. On the one hand, he differentiates between the divine kingdom of grace with the gifts of faith, hope, and love which, as we have seen before, is given by God unconditionally, which is also the premise of Luther's idea of freedom. On the other hand, he is talking about the kingdom of worldly functions, about a legally ordered structure, a world with rights and punishments, as well as institutions for politics, economy, education, business, for which Christians, or rather people, are responsible themselves without reliance on God. "Through this concept of secularization of the world, Lutheran Protestantism relinquishes the

entire world to people as their responsibility, and away from clerical demands."[8] However, as Christians we are also part of this world, and we cannot act in any different way than as Christians.[9] Namely, being motivated by God's love towards us and God's love for this world, we have been called to speak and act within it. We have been called to use our sermons, lectures, and catechesis to form our theology so as to make it relevant to our contemporaries. We have also been called to act in a way that will point to the love of God and everything it implies. So, Christian freedom results in our theology and our faith being understood as public theology (*öffentliche Theologie – Public Theology*). In this context, the president of the council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, states:

> "It is actually very simple: where the politically responsible people are led by ethical postulates, where they promote social justice, preservation of nature, protection of life, and overcoming violence in their political decisions, there they deserve our support. However, where they act contrary to this, a word of criticism needs to be stated clearly at that place and at the right time" (Bedford-Strohm 2012, 9).

According to this, if it is necessary, every Christian is obligated to take to the streets and stand up for their beliefs - just like it was done in Charlottesville, or when the believers took to the streets in order to end the riots after the elections in Kenya.

3.2. The Social Dimension

The central place in the social dimension of Christian freedom is taken up by strengthening of our love for our neighbor. By the love of God, we have been called to show our faith through our works and to actively promote the Kingdom of God in the world. That is the "fruit of faith" which motivates us to practice

8 From the unpublished article: Uwe GERBER, *Martin Luther und die Reformation*, Lörrach, January 2017.

9 Cf. 5th thesis of the Barmen Declaration (1934.): "Fear God, honor the king" (1 Pet 2:17) – In the Bible we read that in this as-of-yet un-redeemed world, which the Church is a part of, the state has a divine obligation to care for justice and peace under the threat and application of force, according to human judgment and human ability. The Church accepts the benefits of this obligation with gratitude and awe before God. It reminds us of the Kingdom of God, it admonishes us in regards to God's commands and righteousness, as well as on the responsibility of rulers and their subjects. It believes and obeys the power of the Word through which God carries everything. We reject the false teaching that the state should and could, apart from this special order, become the only and absolute determinant in human life and thus fulfil the mission of the Church. We also reject the false teaching that the Church should and could, aside from its special order, take on the state methods, its tasks and its honor, thus becoming an organ of the state itself.

boundless love for our neighbor. There are no cultural nor religious obstacles which can obstruct us as we bring morally right decisions. Simply, all people have been created by God and our behavior needs to reflect that and it needs to be characterized by respect and care for all human beings, because freedom involves a communicative function which "doesn't see others as a limitation to one's own freedom, but as partners in its implementation." (Falcke, 15-27). In some other society, a person can be free and express themselves freely only if others affirm them for what they really are, because that is the only possible way of creating a socially acceptable community in which the individual is able to contribute constructively to its development. However, we are not by any means talking about creating "individual drawers" (Ulrich Beck) within society, because they result in the emergence of the so-called "lonely masses" (David Riesmann), which are not familiar with each other and which do not care about the left or right social leanings. Namely, the point is that, in its social dimension, Christian freedom has much more in common with the common good inside which, in the range of their abilities, everyone can contribute and make a concrete difference with their faith and love.

3.3. The Dimension of Identity and Formation

In the last twenty to thirty years of the globalization process, the issues of one's own identity have taken central place, so much so that identity has been characterized as "the number one inflationary term" (Eickelpasch and Rademacher 2004). In line with this, many nations have been contemplating their own identity by asking the question: what is it that makes us special? Will foreigners "water down" our identity? Is our identity determined only within a community? Maybe we should be discussing multiple identities instead of just one identity? This is especially true in the post-modern times, when the awareness was raised about the fact that it is the identities which make the whole of human being, as is the concept of pluralism, i.e., living in diversity, "This implies a life which has been made up of differing life styles and outlooks" (Welsch 1990, 171) because the modern time belief that everything must come from the same source (Keupp 1993, 226-274, 236), unified, and with no exception has been believably overcome in the social sciences during the last few decades.

However, diversity and variety also have their hold in the Christian religion. For example, in his letter to Galatians, the apostle Paul is speaking to a trans-cultural community and he is by no means intending to abolish the differences, but to encourage them to keep living in this kind of diversity. Because, the point is that "they would grow as a community of faith in this diversity" Kahl 2015, 7-12, 9) which is paraphrasing Galatians: whether you are Greek or Jewish, whether you are a slave or a free person, whether you are a woman or a man, the thing